

## Tampa Tribune Op-Ed: Preparing the nation for emergencies

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This country is facing many challenges, but one challenge we can't afford to overlook is effectively protecting our nation. As Floridians, we're all aware of the potential for disasters hitting our state.

Each year, we're faced with hurricane threats and regularly take the brunt of those storms. And this summer, we saw the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on Florida's environment and economy. Like it or not, we must prepare for these threats.

So it's a privilege &mdash; and a great responsibility &mdash; to have been named chairman of the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications for the 112th Congress.

This role, which is part of the House Homeland Security Committee, will allow me to oversee FEMA, communications during emergency situations, grant programs for emergency preparedness and disaster response and recovery efforts on a federal, state and local level.

As a lifelong Florida resident, I sought this role because I know just how vital emergency preparedness is for our state. In this job, there are several issues that I plan to address:

1. Terrorism Response. As much as we all pray that it never happens, a terrorist attack could lead to a major national disaster. Taking the necessary steps to prevent an attack on our country should be a top priority of this Congress, and I will make certain it's a primary concern to this subcommittee. This includes enhancing the way we combat traditional methods of terrorism, but also requires that we look at the threat of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear attacks.

2. Robust Preparedness Plans. The country needs to prepare itself for disasters that we may face. We need to review how we plan for and respond to a hurricane, oil spill, or whatever other emergency we may face in the future. It's critical that we look at our plans on a national, state and local level to make sure they are efficient and up-to-date.

3. Enhanced Communications. The effectiveness of our response to disasters largely is dependent on how well various agencies and personnel communicate. During emergencies, especially with power outages, communication is often difficult and may falter. Emergency response professionals at all levels must be able to utilize available technology to communicate.

4. Efficiency and Effectiveness. When homeland security threats and large-scale emergencies happen, it's imperative that we act swiftly and that we maximize our resources. A large responsibility of this subcommittee will be overseeing grant programs, and making certain the programs are effective and that grants are being directed to appropriate venues.

For more than a year now, I have demanded more oversight of FEMA's grant programs after it was discovered that it awarded more than \$1 million in grants to the controversial group ACORN. This kind of improper grant giving should not happen.

We also must be conscious of the way we spend taxpayer dollars on homeland security and emergency preparedness measures. Americans want the federal government to be more careful with their money, and one way to do this is to make sure operations are efficient and effective.

As chairman, I will ensure that the safety of our nation and the way in which we respond and prepare for disasters are the top priorities of the subcommittee. I look forward to this role, as I'll be able to ensure that the nation, Florida and Tampa Bay are better protected and prepared for whatever we face in the future.

U.S. Representative Gus Bilirakis represents Florida District 9 in Congress.